

तमसो मा ज्योतिर्गमय

SANTINIKETAN  
VISWA BHARATI  
LIBRARY

821.77

C 83 W









# THE WORK PROMETHEAN

**OTHER BOOKS**  
**ON ENGLISH LITERATURE**  
**BY JAMES H. COUSINS**

---

New Ways in English Literature.  
Footsteps of Freedom.  
Modern English Poetry : Its  
Characteristics and Tendencies.

PUBLISHED BY GANESH & CO.

# THE WORK PROMETHEAN

INTERPRETATIONS  
AND  
APPLICATIONS  
OF  
SHELLEY'S POETRY

BY  
JAMES H. COUSINS, D.LIT.

---

*We will take our plan  
From the new world of man,  
And our work shall be called the Promethean.*

---

GANESH & COMPANY, MADRAS  
1933





## PUBLISHERS' NOTE

SRI AUROBINDO GHOSE, reviewing Dr. Cousins' first contribution to literary criticism after his arrival in India in 1915, said : " It is not often that literary criticism of the first order is published in India. 'New Ways in English Literature' is pre-eminently of this kind." Later came "Modern English Poetry, its Characteristics and Tendencies," lectures delivered by Dr. Cousins in Keiogijuku University, Tokyo, in 1919, which afterwards, when published by us, was accepted, along with "New Ways in English Literature," as a thesis by the University. On the strength of this literary work, backed by Dr. Cousins' long experience as an educationist in Ireland and India, his year in the University as Professor of Modern English Poetry, and his reputation as one of the pioneer poets and dramatists of the Irish Literary Revival headed by W. B. Yeats and AE, the Japanese Imperial Ministry of Education, on the recommendation of the University, conferred on him the unique distinction of being the first foreigner to receive the degree of *Bungaku Hakushi* (Doctor of Literature). "The

Work Promethean " carries Dr. Cousins' literary criticism from the general survey of the first two volumes to the study of the works of a single poet whom he has pondered and lectured on for many years in three continents. We are happy to publish it to mark his return to India after three years' absence, in which he has twice crossed Europe and the United States of America as travelling lecturer, and acted for a year as Professor of Poetry in The College of the City of New York. He has returned to India to take up the Principalship of Madanapalle College, Madras Presidency, where he acted in various offices, including that of Principal, from 1916 to 1921, excepting his year in Japan, 1919-1920. Into this handy volume Dr. Cousins has gathered Shelley's ideas on religion, the arts, philosophy, and life, and made a new and challenging interpretation of " Prometheus Unbound ". Written in dignified style, with numerous quotations and references and passages of lively literary controversy, the book should become a favourite with students of literature in the Colleges of India and elsewhere and a joy to lovers of the best things in poetry and criticism.

G. & Co.

# CONTENTS

## CHAPTER I

	PAGE
THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SHELLEY . . . .	3

## CHAPTER II

SHELLEY THE PROMETHEAN . . . .	21
The Message of "Prometheus Unbound."	

## CHAPTER III

THE WORK PROMETHEAN IN RELIGION	49
(a) The Theism of Shelley "The Atheist".	
(b) Shelley on Life and Death.	

## CHAPTER IV

THE WORK PROMETHEAN IN THE ARTS .	73
Shelley's Æsthetical Ideas.	

## CHAPTER V

THE WORK PROMETHEAN IN THOUGHT .	89
Shelley's Conception of the Will.	

## CHAPTER VI

THE WORK PROMETHEAN IN LIFE . .	109
Shelley as Social Reformer.	

---



## THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SHELLEY



## CHAPTER I

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SHELLEY

WHEN Percy Bysshe Shelley died on July 8, 1822, within a month of being thirty years of age, it was known to a handful of lovers of poetry that a master-singer had carried the remainder of his song elsewhere, but had left enough from which humanity could extract joy and wisdom until the supersession of human speech.

The passing of a century brought the general consciousness of the educated world not only up to the achievement of a vague comprehension of Shelley's position among the supreme creators of beauty and wisdom in poetry, but also to the casting of questioning side-glances at some of the verdicts of nineteenth century literary criticism on Shelley and his work.

Matthew Arnold's figure of Shelley as "a beautiful and ineffectual angel, beating in the void his luminous wings in vain"—a figure that



he borrowed from the impression of spiritual quality that Shelley made on the most intimate of his contemporaries, but which Arnold sought to reduce to futility—has been modified in the growing light of knowledge of a free spirit incarnate in times of even more marked external and internal limitation than our own; a spirit whose creative and prophetic genius has inscribed itself on the banners of democratic idealism in slogans which will be embodied in the coming social order of liberated and ennobled humanity. "Shelley is not a classic whose various readings are to be noted with earnest attention," Arnold grumbled. Today Shelley's lightest fragment of utterance is jealously preserved.

Thirty years after Shelley's death Thomas Carlyle wrote to Robert Browning: "I am not sure but you would excommunicate me . . . if I told you all I thought of Shelley . . . weak in genius, weak in character . . . a poor, thin, spasmodic, hectic, shrill and pallid being . . . Poor Shelley, there is something void and Hades-like in the whole inner world of him; his universe is all vacant azure hung with a few frosty, mournful, if beautiful stars . . ."

It is not far from Ecclefechan to Edinburgh and its critics; and the "poor Shelley" of the

one and the "This will never do" of the others divide the dishonours of a criticism that failed because it failed to be truly critical. It essayed a judgment for which it was inadequately equipped, seeing that it lacked affinity with the new poets whom it presumed to judge, which affinity is the first requirement of criticism of any kind. Out of their granite these critics looked on fire, and did not feel comfortable in its presence because it was not granitic. Their age regarded them as judges: we know them now to have been only advocates.

The nineteenth century critics dismissed or disrated Shelley. Their successors in the judgment seats of literature emerged in a world that had come to include Shelley because it had begun dimly to feel that Shelley included the world; not the world of their growingly tragic and not yet completely catastrophic experience, but the world of their dreams that disturbed them with rebuke yet touched them with hope. The new criticism was compelled to live with Shelley. But if the critics could not dismiss him, after the manner of some of their ancestors, they could at least elaborately misunderstand him, or only partially understand him with the best of intentions. Time

had carried them past the possibility of seeing "Shelley plain," which to Browning, notwithstanding Carlyle, was, to those who had it, a wonderful experience; but the critics had in many cases an extraordinary capacity for not seeing him mentally plain even when a century had risen to and beyond some of the non-essentials that blurred the eyes of their predecessors. Oxford, that had turned Shelley from her doors in the flesh, readmitted him in marble; not, however, as an angel, ineffectual or otherwise, but as a young man drowned.

In his "Studies in Green and Grey" Sir Henry Newbolt glimpsed the significance of Shelley when he wrote: "No other poet has come so near to a vision so capable of transforming human life." The sentence somewhat clumsily conveys the meaning that there is a vision which is capable of transforming human life, and that, among the poets, Shelley came nearest catching it. This was Shelley's own conception of his work. His vision of human perfection was only the imaginatively visible appearance of an invisible reality that is inherent in the nature of things and implicit in human evolution. Something of that reality is communicated, through the poet's

expression of the vision, to those who are capable of responding to it. But the capability on either side of the transmission does not rest on literary magic: it is rooted in cosmic reality. Shelley felt that his poetry, in its fullest expression,

Might shake the anarch Custom's reign,  
And charm the minds of men to Truth's own  
    sway.

But his poetry was not the end: it was only the means. In the triumph of Truth, Shelley as ruthlessly eliminated his own personality as he eliminated Prometheus the light-bringer from the last act of the drama of his liberation. The glory of Shelley's vision is, not that it is Shelley's, but that it is vision. This is the root of its immortality, and of its significance for our time and for all time. "Shelley," says W. B. Yeats, in an essay on William Morris, "knew by an act of faith that the economists should take their measurements not from life as it is, but from the vision of men like him, from the vision of the world made perfect that is buried under all minds."

The future of mankind is thus bequeathed to the poets who can penetrate to the hidden significances of the external codes of action. Of these onlookers beyond human boundaries

Shelley was one of the most richly endowed. "I have re-read 'Prometheus Unbound,'" says Yeats,<sup>1</sup> "which I had hoped my fellow-students would have studied as a sacred book, and it seems to me to have an even more certain place than I had thought among the sacred books of the world." The progressive understanding of poetry, of which Shelley was himself a prophet, would have reached this realisation in time, even if Mary Shelley had not anticipated it. She wrote of "Prometheus Unbound" (and it applies to much more of his poetry): "It requires a mind as subtle and penetrating as his own to understand the mystic meanings scattered through the poem. They elude the ordinary reader by their abstraction and delicacy of distinction, but they are far from vague."

Mrs. Shelley thus recognised that, in the realm of poetry, whose appeal is less to the emotions and more to the mind than the appeal of music, clarity of statement is an essential quality. Yet there is a stage beyond which the demand for clarity in poetry may be a demand for something other than poetry; a stage where external expression is incapable

<sup>1</sup> 'Ideas of Good and Evil,' chapter 'The Philosophy of Shelley's Poetry'.

of carrying the whole offering of inner meaning, and words have to bear on one shoulder the image immediately evoked, and on the other the sometimes shadowy, sometimes shining, shapes of thoughts and feelings seeking incarnation in the always inadequate bodies of speech.

At this stage, listening (which is the true reception-mode of poetry even though the eye be its instrument) passes into interpretation. But not all who enjoy Shelley's poetry "as poetry" have the desire or strength of will to break away from the delightful irresponsibility that to many minds poetry connotes, and exercise the intellectual watchfulness and mental self-abnegation that are necessary in order to win the intimate confidence and complete significance of Shelley the thinker. At the stage of interpretation, verbal sounds take on overtones of intuitive assumption, tinctures from a myriad forgotten feelings, memories of long dismantled edifices of thought, undertones of unrecorded experience. The extent to which these are shared by the listener will be the extent of the listener's understanding and joy; the understanding that is not only intellectual assent but identification of spirit. The spirit of true poetry, like the

spirit of the guitar in "Ariel to Miranda," "talks according to the wit of its companions".

For this reason, and because also, as Shelley pointed out in his "Defence of Poetry," the interpretative capacity grows in humanity, complaints of unintelligibility in poetry have a possible repercussion towards the intelligence of the complainant. This is particularly so with regard to Shelley's poetry. The response of his sensorium to the call of the infinite was so immediate and eager that it threw around the glowing orb of expression a corona of aspiration and enthusiasm which blinds eyes not of the eagle order as Shelley's were. Stopford Brooke,<sup>1</sup> for example, can find only "vagueness on vagueness," "the shadow of some greater Power which was itself a shadow," in "this thing to which he gave his worship," in Shelley's "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty". And this want of objectiveness, says Mr. Brooke, "makes Shelley, when he is writing only as the artist, out of his own intellectual imagination, the least comprehensible of all the poets of England." Yet Shelley, in the Hymn, indicates a previously contemplated idea that Intellectual Beauty would free "this world from its dark slavery," which with its context

<sup>1</sup> 'Naturalism in English Poetry.'

should have prevented Mr. Brooke's writing of Shelley as being out of "the real world" in the poem. It might also have suggested that, mingled with what Mr. Brooke terms "this super-subtile ethereality, this thin and eager flame of passionate worship for an ideal, like that of Beauty," there was an element of thought that might be asked as to its significance, and that might, in some of its phases, admit an ancestry as ancient as Plato. Shelley's known intellectual and social enthusiasms add to the assumption of some "fundamental brain-stuff" in his poetry. The individual to whom the toss of a coin was to decide whether he was to devote himself to philosophy or poetry was hardly so completely bifurcated by the falling discus that, when destiny decided for poetry, philosophy was completely and forever cast out. Nature, indeed, had forestalled the hazard as to whether Shelley would be a philosopher or a poet, for he was incurably both.

The fact is that Stopford Brooke, like many another critic of Shelley, has been misled by his own connotation of a word. He has assumed that "the awful *shadow* of some, unseen Power" was to Shelley a shadowy affair, something lacking intellectual clarity. The



Spirit of Beauty, according to the Hymn, consecrates with its own hues all of human thought or form that it shines upon. It is no more shadowy to Shelley than the wind that we only know by its effects as it passes. Behind the object that we identify as beautiful is its own special share of the quality that we call beauty, and that share is a localisation of cosmic qualities that Plato sets among the archetypes of the universe of substance and form and consciousness, and that the Orient has felt to be a constituent of the universal Being. Yeats sings of the same beauty in his song beginning "All things uncomely and broken," and would remake the visible universe as a casket for his dream of the invisible but real Beauty, thus distinguishing between three "shadows" of Beauty: his personal reaction to it, its external image, its essential self. Two or even three poetical shadows (if they be shadows) do not necessarily make one prose substance; but those who know the intellectual capacity of the modern Irish poet will find in it a reflexive justification for Shelley. To the charge that Shelley lacks clarity to the point of being incomprehensible, which lack is taken as a flaw in his poetry, they will answer that it depends on the,

reader; and there are readers of Shelley whose affinity with his spirit is such that his speech, while it may appear opaque to some, speaks to them through the code of an intimacy which signals from spirit to spirit, above the waves of feeling and the promontories of thought, through the flash of illumination.

Shelley himself declared that high poetry "acts in a divine and unapprehended manner beyond and above consciousness".<sup>1</sup> Even thought, however definite it may appear, is not to Shelley an entity in itself, but a reaction to creative agencies in the mental world operating at deeper levels of consciousness than the thoughts themselves, and communicating to the external sensorium what A.E.<sup>2</sup> calls "the oracles from the psyche". Out of the co-operation which Shelley saw between the creative idea and the thinking and feeling capacities of its active agent arise the dreams of the sage and the songs of the poet. There is poetry without vision, and some of it adds to the high pleasure of humanity. There is vision without poetry, and it clarifies understanding. But in Shelley there is both vision and poetry raised, and

<sup>1</sup> "A Defence of Poetry."

<sup>2</sup> "Song and its Fountains."

purified and warmed by an all-embracing compassion.

When thought is pinned to the materials of thought, and feeling is bound to the objects of feeling, there is an obstruction to the flow of the creative impulse. It is either impeded or frozen by cold reason, or made turbulent and muddy by hot passion. Shelley's poetry is neither frigid nor hectic. It is true that literary criticism has frequently regarded Shelley's poetry as feverish. Carlyle's adjectives, "spasmodic, hectic, shrill," reappear under their pseudonyms today. There are critics who find it easy to regard "Epipsychidion" as a mere poetical glorification of at least imaginative unfaithfulness to his wife, and to see in its last seventeen lines the pyrotechnical bursting of a sex-complex. But criticism of this kind is all in its ears. It has closed its mind to Shelley's prefatory indication of the "hard matter," the "ideas," the "reasoning" that the poem contains. True criticism cannot remain content with merely horizontal cross-references on the assumption that the poet means merely what he sings. It must concern itself with the vertical nature of the poet and his poetry, realising that the poet sings what he means through the inadequate codes of

speech; and searching diligently for the significance.

Swinburne recognised the larger significance of Shelley in the second of his two sonnets "For the Feast of Giordano Bruno":

From bonds and torments and the ravening  
flame,  
Surely thy spirit of sense rose up to greet  
Lucretius, where such only spirits meet,  
And walk with him apart till Shelley came  
To make the heaven of heavens more  
heavenly sweet,  
And mix with yours a third incorporate  
name.

Lucretius, the Roman philosopher-poet of the first century before Christ, who lifted up the voice of reason in an age of wickedness and anarchy; Bruno, the philosopher of the Renaissance, who perished at the stake for his attacks on falsehood; Shelley, the inspired singer of Divine Love as the liberator of humanity; this is not the customary companionship of literary history. We have been moved by Swinburne from romantic eras in text-books to something more fundamental and vital; to a classification of artists in word and deed; not according to medium or technique alone, but according to the impulse at the centre of their life: whether it be of the earth, earthy, or of the spirit spiritual; whether it be

content with the shackles of time and place, or satisfied only with the struggle to express through the finite breath of song something of the wonder and mystery of the infinite ether.

The poets of the earthy order serve their place and age, and go with them into oblivion or archaeology. The poets of the spiritual order serve all ages, being of eternity, and remain as powers or as grateful memories according to the measure of their signification of the eternal. That which is the production of a particular environment must necessarily be a sympathetic reflection of the dominant characteristics of its era and a participant in its transiency. But this is just what genius of the Shelleyan type is not. It brings with it a vision from and to a realm beyond its incarnate place and era. It is, in its mildest form, critical, and in its extreme form rebellious. It is never the boon companion of its age, but its enemy. In certain phases of its responses to its environment its expression is modified, as Shelley says in the preface to "Prometheus Unbound". Tennyson and Browning, attacked the materialism of their time. Intelligibility demanded the use of its vernacular—but their inner attitude was not that.

of the Victorian era. The twentieth century in England claims Shelley as an adornment, even an achievement, of the England of the nineteenth century which conferred on him the honour of rejecting him as its foe. But Shelley, seen in his full significance, will stand through all the fluctuations of history as a supreme rebuke to ignoble and unintelligent and unbeautiful life, and one of the most inspiring and constructive influences in the evolution of "the great race that is to come".<sup>1</sup>

• <sup>1</sup> W. B. Yeats in "The King's Threshold".



# SHELLEY THE PROMETHEAN





## CHAPTER II

### SHELLEY THE PROMETHEAN

#### THE MESSAGE OF "PROMETHEUS UNBOUND"

THE arts, according to Hegel, are the most effective means that man has evolved for piercing through or casting aside the non-essentials of ordinary existence and touching the vast movement of the cosmic Life. Among the arts he regarded the drama as the most complete and efficient means of this process of "polarisation". By this he meant the complete drama as represented on the stage. )

But there has always been a type of drama to which complete incarnation would be not life but death. Its happenings are beyond human simulation; its significances are not those of Leicester Square or Broadway.<sup>1</sup> It is enacted at the top of a Jacob's ladder "pitched between Heaven and Charing Cross"<sup>2</sup> up which

<sup>1</sup> The theatre centres of London and New York.

<sup>2</sup> Francis Thompson: "In No Strange Land."

the would-be spectator, who must also be a participant, of the drama must climb from Charing Cross to Heaven.

This drama is the true lineal descendant of the first of dramas, that drama which (as has been figuratively recorded by the seers of old in India) was composed by Brahma, the Lord of Creation, and produced by the celestial stage-manager and author of the laws of the drama, Bharata, on a stage constructed by the cosmic architect, Visvakarma, and set in the heaven of Indra, the Lord of the Sky. The drama of the tangible stage has laid upon it the duty of being the critic, interpreter and reflector of human life. The drama of the human spirit, composed by the creative impulse of humanity, not merely by its generative fever, enacted in the light of the sun, not in the shadows cast by the moon or the limelight, demands that life shall reflect and ultimately embody it.

Shelley's "Prometheus Unbound" is a drama of this order. We do not go to it for facts concerning early Greece or the Europe of 1820, but for fundamental verities that are clamped to no age and are therefore current in and applicable to all ages and places; ideas and thoughts that "look before and after" towards a golden age of "what is not" but was and

will be; an age which, because humanity has set out on a circumnavigation that will bring it back to its native harbour in the realm of the spirit, is at once in the romantic past and the still more romantic future.

This attitude to "Prometheus Unbound" has not, it must be admitted, the full approval of literary criticism. So eminent a critic as Professor Edward Dowden,<sup>1</sup> will not permit a search for anything more specific than "fortitude, justice, love, beauty, hope, unquenched desire," a fairly formidable list of excellences, all the same. Shelley embodied these powers in the drama, and set them in action; but their outer expression, according to Dr. Dowden, is only a poetical version of the teachings of William Godwin. In Dowden's view, Shelley's representation of humanity as a chained Titan, and of evil as a power external to humanity, is "to ignore the true conditions of human existence" and "to falsify the true conception of human progress". He tells us that "Shelley's ideas are abstractions made from a one-sided and imperfect view of facts" ↘

To sift such criticism of Shelley would leave us in a circus-ring with much movement but

<sup>1</sup> "Life of Shelley."

little progress. Its fallacies will appear as we study the drama-poem. Meanwhile, for our encouragement, we may set against Dowden's inhibition on a search for significances in "Prometheus Unbound" the more balanced statement of Dr. C. H. Herford:<sup>1</sup> "When he portrays the universe as at one with the moral strivings of man, he is uttering no fugitive or isolated extravagance, but the perennial faith of idealists of all ages. Under forms of thought derived from the atheist and materialist Godwin, Shelley has given, in 'Prometheus Unbound,' magnificent expression to the faith of Plato and of Christ."

Our quest is towards that faith which Shelley so augustly shared. But before essaying that positive task, it will be well to consider certain other criticisms of our time that stand in the way of a full realisation of the significance of the drama and of its author.

In a brochure on Shelley, Sydney Waterlow, M.A., says: "On the whole, 'Prometheus' has been overpraised." He is not quite sure why this should be so; "perhaps," he ventures, "because the beauty of the interspersed songs has dazzled the critics." As to why the drama does *not* qualify for overpraise he is quite

<sup>1</sup> "Cambridge History of English Literature."

explicit. Not only, he asserts, are the personages of "Prometheus Unbound" too transparently allegorical, but the allegory is insipid; especially tactless being the treatment of the marriage between Prometheus, the Spirit of Humanity, and Asia, the Spirit of Nature, as a romantic love affair. Mr. Waterlow thus makes four specific charges against the drama. Let us examine them.

When Ghiberti chiselled his figures in metal on the doors of the Baptistery at Florence, he did not expect that some day a critic would take objection to them on the ground that they were too transparently metallic. Yet that is what Mr. Waterlow does in objecting to the allegorical nature of "Prometheus Unbound". Shelley wrote it as an allegory. He tells us in the preface to the drama that he endeavoured to create "beautiful idealisms, of moral excellence". He speaks of the "moral interest of the fable". Now a fable is usually permitted to be fabulous; and fable and allegory have one method in common: they speak of one thing and mean both it and something more. As a matter of fact, "Prometheus Unbound" is *not* too transparently allegorical to this critic in at least two points: he is not sure as to what

Demogorgon stands for in the drama, though Shelley makes him call himself "Eternity": and he finds the second act "full of the dreams of Asia," when, in fact, the dream-part of the act has seventy dream-lines by Panthea, the sister of Asia, and only twenty by Asia, and these take up but a small portion of the act.

As to the charge of insipidity made by Mr. Waterlow against the allegory of "Prometheus Unbound," it may be remarked that there are not a few lovers of poetry to whom the story is the reverse of insipid either in the general sense of having no flavour, or in the literary sense of lacking spirit. The existence of these persons reduces the matter to the proposition that it may be insipid to Mr. Waterlow. But something more detailed has to be said in rebuttal of Mr. Waterlow's charge that Shelley's delineation of the relationship between the Spirit of Humanity and the Spirit of Nature reduces it to a "romantic love affair" and a piece of literary tactlessness.

The story of "Prometheus Unbound", as Shelley develops it, is certainly a love affair. The whole drama celebrates the triumph of love. But it is æons removed in both its external grandeur and internal significance

from 'the triviality and sentimentality that hang about the phrase, a "romantic love affair," and that Mr. Waterlow attributes to the drama. When Prometheus, in the first act, speaks of

Asia ! who, when my being overflowed,  
Wert like a golden chalice to bright wine  
Which else had sunk into the thirsty dust,

he is not weaving mere romantic phrases, but expressing in splendid imagery a relationship more exalted yet more intimate than that ordinarily experienced between man and woman. Later Asia speaks of Prometheus as her animating spirit, as he speaks of her as his means of manifestation. These are no drawing-room compliments, but the symbolical expression, in terms of human relationships, of the mystery of the cosmic duality-in-unity of the two aspects, life and form, of one Being and one process. These operate in the atom as well as in the stellar sphere. They are bound together by the cohesive principle in the universe which is called love. "The air is full of marriages," says the poet in "The King's Threshold" of Yeats. Their highest expression is celebrated annually in Vedic India in the Marriage of Shiva and Parvati. They and



the best and noblest ends". Prometheus is therefore humanity as it is in potentiality, not yet in realisation. "That fair being whom we spirits call man" is hidden by "foul masks" which are moulded by "ill thoughts". The getting rid of these masks is the business of life and the subject of the dramatic poem.

Asia is the inner and receptive aspect of one entity whose outer and executive aspect is Prometheus. She is, as Prometheus says, the chalice or containing vessel for the overflow of his being. He is to her, as she says, the soul or animating principle by which she lives. Neither could exist without the other. Whatever may have been Shelley's definite knowledge (and he was a great reader as well as a great thinker) of the significances which the imagination of man had gathered around these personifications of archetypal life, it is a fact that they stood for fundamental aspects of the cosmic Being and its reflection in humanity. Prometheus is the eternal Being (cosmic or individual) which creates its own self-limitation, even as he became the child of Earth, and the victim of Jupiter to whom he himself had given sovereignty. Asia is the supreme receptacle of the experiences of the empirical aspect of life, and is born of the waters, as was

Aphrodite, her Grecian counterpart. They are the *atman* and *buddhi* (the essential ego and intuition) of the Orient. (Asia is the embodiment of wisdom, beauty and love, the unified highest degrees of the triple endowment of humanity, mental, æsthetical and active. With her are her sisters, Panthea (all-seeing) who acts for Asia as the higher mind of man acts for the intuition, as the co-ordinating and generalizing agent between it and the out-turned aspect of the mind, personified in Ione. To Ione's questions Panthea gives the replies in the colossal fourth act in which Prometheus and Asia are invisible and silent, or, rather, have become merged in nature and humanity whose many voices, chanting the amazing chants of liberation through love, are their voices, with Panthea and Ione (the dual *manas* or mind of the Orient) as their hearers.

Jupiter, the antagonist of Prometheus, has been interpreted as "the personification of human institutions". A literary historian<sup>1</sup> writes: "Shelley's philosophy (if one may dignify a hopeless dream by such a name) was a curious aftergrowth of the French Revolution, namely, that it is only the

<sup>1</sup> W. J. Long, "English Literature".

existing tyranny of State, Church and society, which keeps man from growth into perfect happiness. Shelley forgot, like many other enthusiasts, that Church and State and social laws were not imposed on man from without, but were created by himself to minister to his necessities." Mr. Long's interpretation of Shelley on this matter is echoed by a younger writer, Mr. Aldous Huxley<sup>1</sup>: "Get rid of priests and kings, and men will be forever good and happy; poor Shelley's faith in this palpable nonsense remained unshaken to the end." Contrary to Mr. Long, who forgot his Shelley, the poet himself (through the Spirit of the Hour) says that man's guilt and pain existed only because he himself either made or permitted the circumstances which brought them about. If Prometheus and Jupiter may separately be read symbolically, it is hardly too much to claim that the relationship between them may also be read symbolically, and that the giving of "the dominion of wide heaven" to Jupiter by Prometheus makes Prometheus the responsible origin of his own ills. And, contrary to Mr. Huxley, Shelley, with the example of post-revolutionary France

<sup>1</sup> "Do What You Will": Chapter on "Fashions in Love".

before him, would indeed have been blinded with excess of inner light if, in his attacks on the outer manifestations of spiritual and social slavery, he had mistaken the symptom for the disease. But a full understanding of Shelley's attitude makes it clear that he was at least as much concerned with pathological origins as with their effects, and that the "palpable nonsense" in the minds of the critics is a reversal of the palpable sense of Shelley's teaching that, when man has achieved goodness and happiness, external instruction and rulership will have become unnecessary.

We shall get away from the difficulties of wooden or smart interpretation of Shelley's glorious "fable" if we take Prometheus as the figure of expanding human life on its positive side, and Jupiter as the figure of restrictive law or form. In the beginning of things, as recounted by Asia,<sup>1</sup> Saturn, "from whose throne Time fell, an envious shadow," withheld from the earliest inhabitants of the earth the powers and qualities of positive, active life. Prometheus, however,

Gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter,  
And with this law alone, 'Let man be free,'  
Clothed him with the dominion of wide heaven.

<sup>1</sup> Act 2, Scene 4.

In other words, Life (personified by Prometheus), finding its manifestation indefinite under the dominion of Time only, placed itself under the dominion of Law (personified by Jupiter). Had Life been fully developed at this early stage, Law would have been simply an easy channel for it to flow through. But Life was rudimentary, incoherent, inarticulate, and as such needed the defining and developing opposition of Law, as the would-be athlete needs the opposition of system and apparatus in order to gain strength. This opposition is expressed by Shelley as the tyranny of Jupiter, the wielding of the power of Law pure and simple, without any softening of sentiment, law "omnipotent but friendless". Just as Prometheus is humanity in the highest sense, archetypal before the opening of the drama, fulfilled at the close of the drama, Jupiter is law in the restricted sense, inflicting on man the punishments appropriate to his offences; not arbitrary and externally imposed inflictions, but the due and natural results of ignorant error, whereby man learns wisdom in detail. And that acquisition of wisdom is accomplished through a series of reactions in the evolving life of humanity which are typified in the drama as the gifts of Prometheus. The

passage recounting these is a catalogue of many things besides fire and its uses: speech, science, music vocal and instrumental, sculpture, medicine, astronomy, travel, social organisation.<sup>1</sup> This is clearly a picture of the external achievements of civilisation; the gifts of a human spring which is, as Emerson says:<sup>2</sup>

Revealer of the inmost powers  
Prometheus proffered, Jove denied.

But in the mind of the poet these were not final accomplishments. Shelley's ideal for humanity was not a mere elevation of unregenerate life through accumulations of substance and external capacity, for he believed with the Oriental sage Vasishta that the mere addition of the finite to the finite does not produce the infinite.<sup>3</sup> Man's accomplishments were only "the alleviations of his state Prometheus gave to man". And for bringing these alleviations into existence, Prometheus was bound and tortured by Jupiter. This is the point at which the dramatic action of the poem begins.

We shall miss the essence of Shelley's idea if, in these dramatic antagonisms imposed upon

<sup>1</sup> Act 2, Scene 4.

<sup>2</sup> "May Day."

<sup>3</sup> "Mystical Experience," Bhagavan Das.

the poet by the exigencies of speech and action, thought and feeling, we allow any sense of complete separateness between them to dull and cloud our imaginations; if we see in the sufferings of Prometheus only the vindictiveness of Jupiter, and think of the evils from which mankind suffered as being only evil. We have to regard these personifications and happenings as co-operative elements within a single process, animated by a single energy, moving towards a single fulfilment.

The situation, then, at the opening of the poem, is that, under the provocative restriction of Law (Jupiter), humanity, impressed by its archetypal self (Prometheus), finds ways towards the achievement of the freedom that Prometheus claimed for it. But the "alleviations" of civilisation can take it no further, for its higher self (Prometheus) is shut away from participation in the arts of life. "All best things" are "confused to ill," and must remain so until the spirit of Prometheus proves itself superior in virtue to Jupiter, and breaks the tyrant's power. This is duly accomplished. The sufferings inflicted on Prometheus draw out and strengthen his wisdom and compassion; and in the destined hour, the foreknowledge of which had carried Prometheus through his

tortures, Jupiter himself, dethroned by triumphant Love, acknowledges Prometheus as "the monarch of the world". Law yields to life, and Hercules, the embodiment of Power, when releasing Prometheus from the cliff, puts into a sentence the psychological significance of the drama :

Most glorious among spirits, thus doth  
strength  
To wisdom, courage, and long-suffering love,  
And thee, who art the form they animate,  
Minister like a slave.

And now abideth Wisdom, Courage, Love,  
but the greatest of these, in the Promethean  
conception of Shelley, is Love.

, Fate, Time, Occasion, Chance and Change,  
to these  
All things are subject but eternal Love,

said Demogorgon, the oracle of Eternity. By allying himself with eternal Love, Prometheus rose above the limitations of temporal Law. By love, in the language of India, man can free himself from the laws of action (*karma*). "By the accident of good fortune a man may rule the world for a time, but by virtue of love he may rule the world forever," said Laotze six centuries before Christ.



the higher powers are inoperative; and that law cannot be set aside until love is the active principle in all life's affairs.) This does not, of course, mean anything so foolish as a cessation of all struggle for liberation until love has been achieved. In stating the goal, Shelley did not mistake it for the starting-point (as Francis Thompson obtusely wrote) save in the subjective sense that one's ideal subtly influences every action towards its attainment. The drama has therefore its individual as well as its cosmic and general import: or, rather (to state more truly the Shelleyan view), (the triumph of Prometheus, being a cosmic event, is therefore an individual event.) The triumph of the Flame-bringer over the forces of Darkness not only released himself from the rock to which he was bound, but released the inner powers of humanity. (The Spirits who sing the following song are the living principles of the human mind; not thoughts as such,) for they are but the masks and counters of the thinker, but the vital thing at their centre, "fair spirits," the Earth calls them,

Whose homes are the dim caves of human  
thought,  
And who inhabit, as birds wing the wind,  
Its world-surrounding ether.

Our spoil is won,  
Our task is done,  
We are free to dive or soar or run.  
Beyond and around,  
Or within the bound  
Which slips the world with darkness round.

We'll pass the eyes  
Of the starry skies,  
Into the hoar deep to colonise.  
Death, Chaos and Night'  
From the sound of our flight  
Shall flee like mist from a tempest's might.

And Earth, Air and Light,  
And the Spirit of Might  
Which drives round the stars in their fiery  
flight ;  
And Love, Thought and Breath,  
The powers that quell death,  
Whenever we soar shall assemble beneath.

And our singing shall build  
In the void's loose field  
A world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield ;  
We will take our plan  
From the new world of man,  
And our work shall be called the Promethean.

This is the chant of the released powers of the human mind, rejoicing in their newly found freedom, and anticipating its unrestricted exercise. To Shelley, in his world of the creative imagination, it is an accomplishment. To his age and to ours it is a prophecy. But it is a prophecy whose fulfilment

may be essayed with assurance; for in the chant, Shelley, the practical idealist, who declared that he would never be satisfied with anything, but would accept anything that helped towards the ideal, provides 'us' with a sure guide to action, a method which has received the ratification of those who have attained spiritual liberation in all ages and places.

When the Spirits of the Mind set out on their adventures, they will have for their helping three "powers that quell death". Here, as elsewhere in his poetry, Shelley expresses his realisation of the triple process in evolution, mental, emotional and actional—the cognition, affectiveness and conation of the psychologists. The figure is an epitome of his philosophy of life and its regeneration. (Love is the redemptive power in the cosmos and human life.) Thought, in its highest aspect as Intellectual Beauty, is to Shelley but a synonym for Love made intelligent, the power that both consecrates and liberates. The Breath of Life—more-abundant blows through every crevice of his brain and heart. But in this song he invests these at present callow powers of humanity with the import of a law of life. They are not simply the normal loving,

thinking and breathing of the mass of humanity. They are powers that presuppose development and discipline for the attainment of their death-quelling potency.

It cannot be said with finality that Shelley meant that either of these attainable powers, if developed to its utmost possibility, could singly confer on humanity the realisation that death, as it is commonly thought of, is as much a transient and life-serving incident as any other experience. There are schools of discipline in India that teach the attainment of the Promethean experience by one or other path. But Shelley's synthetical imagination saw that Love was worthless unless carried out in thought and action; that Thought was dangerous if not softened by compassion and corrected by life; that Activity was futile without compassionate impulse and intelligent guidance. It is not certain whether Shelley had the Vedic wisdom in mind or not in this passage. The numerous references to India in his poems would seem to indicate more than a surface interest.\* In any case, it is remarkable that he should throw into a single phrase the four Indian ways of power: *bhakti-yoga* or, the discipline of devotion, *jnana-yoga* or the discipline of the mind, *pranayama* or the way

## THE WORK PROMETHEAN

of bodily control, and *karma-yoga* or the path of action. These in their totality form the moral discipline, *raja-yoga*, the full expression of the Will directed towards the regeneration of the complete individual and of the chaotic world through creative action, and the construction thereby of a realm in which the Spirit of Wisdom may reign.

What that Spirit stands for in Shelley's imagination we shall better understand if we link up this Chorus in "Prometheus Unbound" with the great chant in "The Revolt of Islam".<sup>1</sup> There Shelley sings of Wisdom as the Mother and Soul, the source and living principle, of the manifested universe. He sees Wisdom (the cosmic intuition or *vijnan* of the *Upanishads*) reascending the human heart, and Her "irresistible children" chaining both the elements and their own wills in order to swell, not their own glory, but Hers. (In "Prometheus Unbound" he sees the same irresistible children building a world for the habitation, not of themselves alone, though they will share it, but of their Mother, the Cosmic Wisdom.) In both poems Shelley's imagination shines and glows as it contemplates in one "the light of life" and in the other the "work . . .

<sup>1</sup> Following Canto 5, Stanza 51.

Promethean"; the transmission, from the higher regions of life to the lower, of that celestial flame that brings illumination to the mind, warmth to the heart, and beauty and intelligence to action.









THE WORK PROMETHEAN  
IN RELIGION



## CHAPTER III

### THE WORK PROMETHEAN IN RELIGION

#### (a) THE THEISM OF SHELLEY “THE ATHEIST”

SHELLEY was expelled from University College, Oxford, for writing a pamphlet entitled “The Necessity of Atheism”. The same college now boasts a statue to him, probably because the century and more which has elapsed since his rejection, has brought some measure of realization that he himself was specially sensitive to the element of Personality in the universe, which is the special characteristic of religious experience. Priestcraft without consecration, dogmatism without demonstration, and human caricatures of Divinity, provoked the scorn of the poet; but an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of what is commonly termed a

"Supreme Being" Shelley was not. He specifically states in the preface to "The Revolt of Islam" that he spoke against "the erroneous and degrading idea which men have conceived of a Supreme Being," but "not the Supreme Being itself."

Stopford Brooke in his essays on "Naturalism in English Poetry," among much obsolete criticism of Shelley, very truly says: "If we have a right to call him anything, we may name him an ideal Pantheist, and say that, at times, the Essence he conceived as the one supreme Thought—a term interchangeable in his mind with infinite Love—he conceived also as active, and therefore as having conscious being."

Shelley's vision was indeed constantly being crossed by shadowy indications of a Being too immense and resplendent to be seen by the external eye and called by a single name. Behind the West Wind he feels not only impersonal powers in nature but a Spirit with which he strives in prayer. In the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" he sings:

The awful shadow of some unseen power  
Floats though unseen among us: visiting  
This various world with as inconstant wing  
As summer winds that creep from flower to  
flower.

And in "The Zucca":

Summer was dead and Autumn was expiring,  
 And infant winter laughed upon the land  
 All cloudlessly and cold; when I, desiring  
 More in this world than any understand,  
 Wept o'er the beauty which, like sea retiring,  
 Had left the earth bare as the wave-worn sand  
 Of my poor heart, and o'er the grass and flowers  
 Pale for the falsehood of the flattering hours.

I loved—O no, I mean not one of ye;  
 Or any earthly one, though ye are dear  
 As human heart to human heart may be;  
 I loved, I know not what—but this low sphere,  
 And all that it contains, contains not thee,  
 Thou who, seen nowhere, I feel everywhere,  
 Dim object of my soul's idolatry.

This "awful shadow," this "I know not what," is not, despite these phrases taken from the vocabulary of human limitation, a taciturn divinity seated far aloof from mortal concerns. On the contrary, as Shelley sees it, with the same clear vision as that of the seer of India who created the Gayatri Mantram which expresses the identity of illumination in the universe and the individual, it is Itself the impulse in mankind to knowledge of Itself; the light in humanity through which humanity recognises the Light of lights. Its push is felt in all things; but the flash of recognition comes with invitation from the human side.

It flows through all the shapes of heaven  
and earth,

Neither to be contained, delayed nor hidden,  
Making divine the loftiest and the lowest  
When for a moment thou art not forbidden  
To live within the life which thou bestowest.

We find the fullest expression of Shelley's idea of the Supreme Power of the universe in the forty-second and forty-third stanzas of "Adonais," in which he speaks, in connection with the death of Keats, of that Power

Which has withdrawn his being to its own,  
Which wields the world with never wearied  
love,

Sustains it from beneath and kindles it above.

Having thus stated the work of the Supreme Being as it relates to the world, Shelley proceeds to set out in detail its activity in and through humanity and nature, and in doing so epitomises and anticipates by almost half a century the doctrine of evolution, and gives us an example of the augmentation of significance which, as he himself has written, time gives to "high poetry" in the disclosure, according to the opening vision of humanity, of "new and wonderful applications of the eternal truth which it contains".<sup>1</sup> He sings of "the one Spirit's plastic stress" which

<sup>1</sup> "A Defence of Poetry."

Sweeps through the dull, dense world, compelling there  
 All new successions to the forms they wear,  
 Torturing the unwilling dross, that checks  
 its flight,  
 To its own likeness, as each mass may bear,  
 And bursting in its beauty and its might  
 From trees and beasts and men into the  
 heaven's light.

The common usage of the word *wields* in the first of these two passages may bring into the mind the idea of a Power external to the world, for we are accustomed to thinking of the wielder as something separate from that which is wielded. We speak of "wielding the pen" or the sceptre; and an *unwieldy* instrument is one which is not readily obedient to our will. But the word *wield* means more than this; it means managing or conducting; and it is in this sense that Shelley uses it. But, in addition to management, the poet attributes to the Power the function of sustaining the world from beneath and kindling it above, in which symbolical phrases Shelley's vision ranges from the provision of the necessities of the lower nature of the world to the illumination of the spirit that is humanity's highest experience.

In this statement of the work of the Supreme Power in the world we have an example of a



patterning of ideas in Shelley's creative imagination which is frequently to be detected in his poetry as it is in the expression of other great poets. Activity, sustentation, illumination, these are his triangle reflecting a felt primal order of the cosmos, which Christianity reflects in the attributes of Omnipotence, Omnipresence and Omniscience, and the Vedanta of India in the *gunas* (qualities of nature) *Rajasa* or activity, *Tamasa* or substance, and *Sattva* or consciousness.

But at the point in "Adonais" at which Shelley expresses the triple function of the Supreme Power, he may be regarded as saying nothing more esoteric than what is conveyed in the phrases from Christian scripture and hymnology: "Underneath and around are the everlasting arms," "Give us this day our daily bread," and "Lead, kindly light". He is, in fact, stating in another way (the theme of "Prometheus Unbound," that life is superior to its forms. He is transcendentalist as well as pantheist. But when we pass into the second of the two stanzas under consideration, we get the full measure of Shelley's thought as to the field of the divine operation. The "plastic stress" of the "one Spirit" is felt *within* all nature and humanity. It "sweeps

through the dull, dense world" of matter; bursts "in its beauty and its might from trees and beasts and men"; and finds its culmination in "the heaven's light," which is Shelley's metaphor for spiritual illumination.

It would be easy to be self-deceived into the illusion that Shelley is here indulging in a hopeless dream, a dream incomprehensible, a dream without substance (to epitomise certain criticisms of the poet), when he is in fact stating the clearest science, but stating it gloriously, on the wing, as he here states the process of evolution not only in its biological aspect and order as Darwin and his followers did half a century later, but in its spiritual aspect as it was announced by the sages of India thousands of years before. The successions of external form are not, in Shelley's view, mere adaptations to externally compelled necessity. They are compulsions of the one Spirit, with necessity as the sharp end of the goad. A fish may have taken wing in order to escape from an enemy, and thus inaugurated the kingdom of the air. But flight was not only achieved by the creature; it was presented as an experience in time and space to the animating Spirit. Whatever the differences may be in outer

expression, the animating Spirit is one and indivisible. The dross of the universe, which is itself a phase of the cosmic operation, acting according to its nature, is awakened out of its inertia and grossness into a state of responsiveness and fineness in which it can become the mobile and ultimately conscious expression of the beauty and power of the Spirit. And we note that the plastic stress which tortures "the unwilling dross" is not standardised in uniformity, but adjusted to the bearing capacity of the instrument. The stress is "plastic" because it has to adapt itself to the infinite gradations of response in its universe. Its work is to evolve the instruments according to their order. To break them would be to break its own expression. "On earth the broken arcs" sang Browning,—because we see brokenly. But Shelley had the heavenly vision that saw the "perfect round," and he figures it for us in these stanzas which are packed with a deeper and wider spiritual wisdom than unilluminated literary criticism has yet realised.

One other point remains to be noticed in order to gather the full riches of these lines. That Power, says Shelley, which wields the world wields it "with never wearied love."

These words are not hammered into a line to fill it out, or painted on for ornament. They carry the whole significance of Shelley's central concept of the nature of the Supreme Being. True, they may not yield the full fruitage of their meaning apart from the rest of the poet's expression; but no literary gardener can hang the whole of his harvest on one branch of his tree. The instant flash that fell from the heaven of heavens, burning with the secret of the universe, translates itself into reverberations from hill to hill and from cloud to cloud; and from the intensity, the length and the complexity of the sound we judge the flame. To know what Shelley means by the phrase "never wearied love" we have to read "Prometheus Unbound" from beginning to end, and not once only; and at the end of that salutary experience we shall know that, (to him, love is the very essence of the universal Life and its operations, the eternal fact beyond the influences of time and place, chance and change.)

"In love," says Rabindranath Tagore, the Shelley of India, "we find a joy which is ultimate because it is the ultimate truth."<sup>1</sup> But this "truth" is no mere assumption of

<sup>1</sup> "Creative Unity."

sentimentality: it is seen by these master poets as the eternal necessity, the inevitable logical condition underlying any intelligent thought on the nature of the universe. And what applies to that universal Spirit as a self-existent Being applies also to its activities within that restricted area of itself called the world, and the still more restricted area of human life. We cannot think of a world without an interfused universal cohesive principle; else would it vanish into thin air, as would the subjective worlds of man's imagination or speculation. And since that cohesive principle is not an external acquirement, but the essential nature of the universal Being, it cannot become weary or cease its activities. Destruction, which is the enemy of cohesion, may at times assume the air of mastery, but its end is ultimately the service of cohesion. "I feel most vain all hope but love," says Prometheus; and when he triumphs over the tyranny of Jupiter, all nature is suffused with the love which radiates from Asia, his consort. Her sister, Panthea (the all-seeing), says that not she only, but the whole world, seeks the sympathy of Asia. There are sounds in the air which speak the love of all articulate things, to which Asia replies:

all love is sweet,  
Given or returned. Common as light is love  
And its familiar voice wearies not ever.

And in one of the most exquisite songs in all literature (that beginning "My soul is an enchanted boat") Asia sings of

Realms where the air we breathe is love,  
Which in the winds and on the waves doth  
move,  
Harmonising the earth with what we feel  
above.

That love,) in the thought of Shelley, (was an impartation of the essence of the Supreme Being. To Shelley, in very truth, "God is Love". But this theism of Shelley was universal, not localised in history or geography or limited in personality; and in a time of almost deeper spiritual darkness than our own, the vision of the supreme theist was called atheism.

### (b) SHELLEY ON LIFE AND DEATH

Ideas of life and death are inevitably associated with ideas concerning the larger Life within which human life has always felt itself function. Shelley's idea of death as an incident of life will well reward study, for it is not based on theological assumptions taken from others, but on his free intuitional responses

to his universe through a sensorium uniquely equipped in retentive synthetical sensitiveness.

In "Prometheus Unbound" Shelley makes the Earth say :

For know there are two worlds<sup>s</sup> of life and death ;

One that which thou beholdest ; but the other  
Is underneath the grave, where do inhabit  
The shadows of all forms that think and live  
Till death unite them and they part no more ;  
Dreams and the light imaginings of men,  
And all that faith creates and love desires,  
Terrible, strange, sublime and beauteous  
shapes.

In another passage in the drama-poem he expresses the idea of a realm of archetypes which is the source of the future forms of the arts. In the above passage he declares the existence of a super-physical habitat of the activities of the human psyche, the realm of imagination, faith and love. From the standpoint of the human entity these realms are one realm where dwell the prophetic "voices and the shadows" of "all that man becomes" side by side with the accomplished "shadows of all forms that think and live," the simultaneously departing and returning movements within the life of the universe and man. From the side of human life they are "underneath the grave" and only reachable through the

change of consciousness called death. From the side of the "shadows" (the physically intangible but very real inner principles of outer embodiments and their vital activities) life becomes the intangibility; nay, life in the human sense is death in the spiritual sense:

Death is the veil which those who live call  
life;  
They sleep, and it is lifted,

says the Earth;<sup>1</sup> and in "Adonais" he restates the same idea:

Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,  
Stains the white radiance of Eternity,  
Until Death tramples it to fragments.

To Shelley there is no ultimate antithesis of life and death. His juxtaposing of them in the unescapable language of time and space is no more radical than the dramatic sundering of imaginatively opposed persons in dream; but in the ultimate evaluation, death is an incidental expedient of life. Mrs. Shelley, who acutely appreciated the poet's thought, very subtly expressed the Shelleyan conception of death when, writing of Shelley's idea of what is frequently referred to in common speech as life after death, she deliberately avoided giving

<sup>1</sup> "Prometheus Unbound."



any sense of reality to death by saying that, "of his speculations as to what will befall this inestimable Spirit when we *appear to die* (italics ours), a mystic ideality tinged these speculations in Shelley's mind". Then follows a most valuable summary of Shelley's thought: "Certain stanzas in 'The Sensitive Plant' express, in some degree, the almost inexpressible idea, not that we die into another state, when this state is no longer (for some reason unapparent as well as apparent) accordant with our being; but that those who rise above the ordinary nature of man fade from before our imperfect organs; they remain in their 'love, beauty and delight' in a world congenial to them, and we, 'clogged by error, ignorance and strife,' see them not till we are fitted by purification and improvement to their higher state."

Bearing in mind this precise statement of Shelley's idea of continuity of consciousness beyond the line, marking its change of focus, which we call death, it is interesting to recall Francis Thompson's complaint in his essay on Shelley against the "lack of Christian hope" in "Adonais". The lines beginning:

He is a portion of the loveliness  
Which once he made more lovely . . .

are characterised by Thompson as "Shelley's inexpressibly sad exposition of pantheistic immortality." This sadness, be it noted, is Thompson's own reaction to his own idea of pantheistic immortality; for the lines themselves are, as Shelley wrote them, a chant of triumphant joy. Thompson admits in the poem, however, "some gleams of more than mock solace—but they are obtained by implicitly assuming the personal immortality which the poem explicitly denies". Such gleams come from the lines in which "the inheritors of unfulfilled renown" rise to greet Adonais as he assumes his waiting throne in the celestial realm, and from the final stanza in which

The soul of Adonais, like a star,

Beacons from the abode where the Eternal are.

Why these very explicit statements of personal immortality should be regarded by Thompson as merely implicit beside the no more explicit "pantheistic" lines, is only to be explained by the theological assumption which mars the whole essay, and betrays the poet who, in a moment of intuitional adventure, transported Jacob's ladder from its own locale, and pitched it between Heaven and Charing Cross, into the impossible literary dogma that the absence of the "Christian hope" of personal

immortality in "Adonais" (a hope that is not confined to Christianity) prevents it from being perfect; a dogma which would cancel much of the world's most perfect poetry.

In the glorious eloquence of the stanzas from the thirty-ninth to the last, Shelley's imagination contracts and dilates as it successively realises the limitations of Adonais as an embodied spirit, and the liberation of his qualities from the bonds of physical embodiment into unlimited association with their affinities in nature. He is aware that personal identity is a localisation of consciousness made possible by interaction with its universe. But identity goes deeper than personality, and when personality is removed, identity remains, as Shelley felt, and as psychical research has demonstrated in our day. All through the stanzas Shelley never loses sight of Adonais as Adonais. He tells the Dawn that the spirit it laments is not gone. Even in stanza forty-two, in which he declares that Adonais is "made one with nature" and that the world-wielding power "has withdrawn his being to its own," he preserves the identity of Adonais in "his voice" and as "a presence." The offending "pantheistic" lines

He is a portion of the loveliness  
Which once he made more lovely . . .

are immediately followed by the assertion,

he doth bear

His part, while the one Spirit's plastic Stress  
Sweeps through the dull, dense world . . .

Others, besides Francis Thompson, with bewildering opacity of mind, have taken the same "pantheistic" view of Shelley's thought, apparently through reading such phrases as "He is a portion . . ." and "He is made one . . ." as meaning that Adonais has vanished into the constituent elements of dawns and flowers, fountains and air, herb and stone, when Shelley is very careful to indicate that he is saying nothing of the kind. There is also a peculiar perversity in the suggestion by critics of something pagan and obnoxious in the pantheism of Shelley (as if he had taken over a ready-made system of thought from an obsolete world), when in fact the free play of his imagination upon life as he experienced it, and contemplated it in the records of human thought and action, led him to views no more obnoxiously pantheistic than that of the omnipresence of God, or of the Hebrew poet in the Christian canon who sang: "If I make

my bed in hell, behold thou art there," or of the seer of the Apocalypse who visualised the passing of all things save the ultimate Being.

To Shelley, as a full reading of his poems shows, and as Mrs. Shelley confirms in the passage quoted above, "death" is a process of life whereby the entity moves from one dimension of consciousness to another. By discipline ("purification and improvement") on this side of "the veil which those who live call life" humanity will yet achieve the power to shred the veil, and live in the "two worlds of life and death". That discipline is conscious aspiration expressed through exalted and purified feeling, clear fearless thought, and unflinching right action. All this is thrown by Shelley into three lines in the chorus of the *Spirits of human thought* in "*Prometheus Unbound*," which we have already considered,<sup>1</sup> but which now disclose a fuller significance :

And Love, Thought, and Breath,  
The Powers that quell death,  
Whenever we soar shall assemble beneath.

Such process of "purification and improvement" whereby humanity, in Shelley's view, will ultimately achieve the power to "quell

<sup>1</sup> Chapter II.

death" cannot be only a gradual accomplishment of human history enjoyed by entities unborn through the labours of their forgotten and unrewarded ancestors. The interactions of the "shadows" and "forms," which are inevitable in the process, operate, as Shelley has declared, on both sides of the "veil." Their purpose has been fulfilled in the lives of seers and saints in both hemispheres. It is being partially fulfilled today in the experiences of psychical sensitives, but can only remain a partial fulfilment while the essential "purification and improvement" are only partially undertaken. The quelling of death is therefore an individual achievement, and obviously cannot be effected in a single excursion from the thither side of the veil to the hither and back again. It involves parallel continuity on both sides of the veil, even as the simplest acts of life involve a constant movement between the external act and its internal laws and conditions.

This being logically so, we should expect in so good a thinker as Shelley some recognition of the idea of a succession of embodiments in form for the fulfilment of the archetypal intention. The idea has in various ways found expression in religion and philosophy.

It is accepted in the Orient as naturally as a single life is accepted in the Occident. It was held by the early Christian church. Shélley puts it into two passages in his poetry. In "Ariel to Miranda" he makès Ariel say:

Poor Ariel sends this silent token  
Of more than ever can be spoken ;  
Your guardian spirit, Ariel, who  
From life to life must still pursue  
Your happiness, for thus alone  
Can Ariel ever find his own . . .  
. . . When you die, the silent moon,  
In her interlunar swoon,  
Is not sadder in her cell  
Than deserted Ariel.  
When you live again on earth,  
Like an unseen star of birth  
Ariel guides you o'er the sea  
Of life from your nativity.  
Many changes have been run  
Since Ferdinand and you begun  
Your course of love, and Ariel still  
Has tracked your steps and served your will.  
Now, in humbler, happier lot,  
This is all remembered not . . .

A reminiscence of the idea appears later in the poem where he tells how the maker of the guitar felled a tree in the Apennines ;

. . . and so this tree--  
Oh that such our death may be !  
Died in sleep, and felt no pain,  
To live in happier form again.

The other passage is the Chorus in "Hellas":

Worlds on worlds are rolling ever  
 From creation to decay,  
 Like the bubbles on a river,  
     Sparkling, bursting, borne away.  
 But they are still immortal  
 Who, through birth's orient portal  
 And death's dark chasm hurrying to and fro,  
 Clothe their unceasing flight  
 In the brief dust and light  
 Gathered around their chariots as they go.  
 New shapes they still may weave,  
 New gods, new laws, receive:  
 Bright or dim are they as the robes they last  
 On Death's bare ribs had cast.

And, as a last word on Shelley and religion, it is notable that "the atheist" and "pantheist," in the lines immediately following the foregoing, makes the Chorus confer on Jesus Christ the title of "Promethean Conqueror"—one whose conquest was made through Truth as against the conquest of force which is the subject of the poem.





## CHAPTER IV

# THE WORK PROMETHEAN IN THE ARTS

### SHELLEY'S ÆSTHETICAL IDEAS

THE intellectual and æsthetical endowment of Shelley was at once so large, so balanced, and so synthesised, that, when the poet became critic, he raised criticism to the level of creation, as in his immortal *Defence of Poetry*; and when the critic became poet, he raised a chant whose lyrical purity and harmonious accompaniment of thought became, even when not specifically so in intention, the most trenchant criticism of the dissonances of life, by contrast with his chant.

It became also criticism in the indirect manner of art by casting upon lines and passages the intuitive luminosity that may, when brooded upon, be condensed into the clear lights of intellectual affirmation. If

Shelley had never written a line of 'prose expressing his ideas of the arts, it would be possible to derive his æsthetical philosophy not only from a synthesis of passages scattered through his writings, but, as we now propose to demonstrate, from a single passage in "Prometheus Unbound".<sup>1</sup> The passage is:

And lovely apparitions, dim at first,  
 Then radiant, as the mind, arising bright  
 From the embrace of beauty, whence the forms  
 Of which these are the phantoms, casts on them  
 The gathered rays which are reality,  
 Shall visit us, the progeny immortal  
 Of Painting, Sculpture, and rapt Poesy,  
 And arts, though unimagined, yet to be.  
 The wandering voices and the shadows these  
 Of all that man becomes, the mediators  
 Of that best worship, love, by him and us  
 Given and returned; swift shapes and sounds  
     which grow  
 More fair and soft as man grows wise and kind,  
 And, veil by veil, evil and error fall.

Under the compelling interest of the drama it is easy to glide over this passage as a merely contributory element in the general movement, somewhat complicated in construction and lame in the opening lines. But if the passage should call us to return and brood on it, we shall find in this vision of the Fire-Bringer Shelley's own doctrine (1) of the origin of the arts, (2) their

<sup>1</sup> Act 3, Scene 3.

function in the cosmic operation, (3) their relationship with the evolution of humanity, and (4) the conditions of their progress.

This is an enormous thesis, the subject of philosophical speculation from Socrates and his predecessors to Crocé and his successors. Yet Shelley casts it all, through the legitimate dogma of the creative imagination, into an unrhymed "sonnet's scanty plot of ground";<sup>1</sup> and by the power of the imagination lays it out with such quality of design and decoration that, like a miniature Japanese garden, it communicates an imaginative vastness to the physically minute and simultaneously magnifies the spiritual stature of the beholder. This experience cannot be had by a hasty passage through the garden. It calls for close attention to the involutions and evolutions of the design, and to their several and conjoint intentions. To the cultivated eye and sensitive mind the garden may yield its fulness with intuitive instantaneousness. But even to these there is a special joy of the spirit in mentally separating the apparent complexity of the garden into its several plots for the fuller enjoyment of each, and for attaining through this analytical process the paradox of an ultimately simple

<sup>1</sup> Wordsworth.

and radiant understanding. We shall now essay this process.

First let us recall the circumstances under which Prometheus speaks the sonorous and luminous phrases which Shelley puts into his mouth. Through the exercise of "Gentleness, Wisdom, Virtue and Endurance" Prometheus has dethroned Jupiter who held the world in oppression. Anticipating the process of events in the new era which his freeing of the world had inaugurated, Prometheus visualises himself living, with his wife Asia and her sisters Panthea and Ione, in an enchanted cave, observing the ebb and flow of things, themselves unchanged. To them (the embodiments of the freed and unified powers of redeemed humanity) in their place of observation beyond the fluctuations of the phenomenal universe, will come "the echoes of the human world". These will tell, among other things, of the advance of humanity in the external aspects of its life, including the arts; and the anticipation of that advance in the passage quoted summarises Shelley's æsthetical ideas:

The "lovely apparitions" which shall visit them are the "immortal progeny of Painting, Sculpture and rapt Poesy," and other arts to be. Prometheus (the mouthpiece of Shelley) is

here speaking, in the typical Shelleyan manner, from the archetypal side of life. He is not, in these words, speaking of pictures, statues and poems, but of the universal impulse to plastic and rhythmical creation which is the basis of art.

This impulse, acting on the variously endowed media of the artists, arouses the will-to-create within one or other of the interacting phases of appearance, form and motion. The first inner conceptions of the artists are the progeny immortal which shall visit the Promethean observers. The ultimate formal expressions of the artists are apprehensible by those at their own incarnate level. Prometheus visualises them from the celestial side; their phantasmal archetypes, not their concrete accomplishments; the creative idea in the artist's mind, not the created object at his finger-tips. The parents of the ultimate forms of art are "mind" and "beauty". From the "embrace" of the mental and emotional powers of the artist-father-mother come "the forms of which these (the visiting apparitions) are the phantoms," the subjective and as yet undefined anticipations.

The association of the intellectual and æsthetical powers of the psyche in artistic creation is elsewhere expressed in Shelley's

poetry. A dozen or so lines before the passage that we are considering, Prometheus looks forward to his group searching for hidden thoughts. A pure psychologist would look for clear thoughts or logical thoughts. Shelley looks for *lovely* thoughts. He carries an æsthetical quality over into the mental domain. In this particular instance the mental process is the substantive; *thoughts* modified by the æsthetical quality *lovely*. In the title of the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty" he turns it the other way round, making *beauty* the substantive, and *intellectual* quality the modification; and in the body of the poem declares that the light alone of Intellectual Beauty "gives *grace* and *truth* to life's unquiet dream". In the Chorus of Spirits of the human mind in the fourth act of "Prometheus Unbound" ("Our toil is done . . .") the same association is seen in what might, on a casual reading, be taken as mere poetical fancy. The spirits, which are embodiments of the freed mental powers of humanity, build "a world for the Spirit of Wisdom to wield" by their singing, which is an act of æsthetical creation.

So much for the source and generation of the arts: Cosmic Powers from whom, through the

union of the mind with beauty, the forms of art are brought forth. Shelley states quite plainly their place in the cosmic scheme. They are the "mediators" (the instruments of expression and means of communication) between the worlds celestial and terrestrial; the transmitters of the love of Man for God and of God for Man. Love, says Shelley in the passage before us, is the highest form of worship, and the arts are its channels. Art, therefore, is religion.

The converse of two identities should be equally true. If art is religion, religion is art. Between the apparently externally separated twain moves the single impulse of "that best worship, love". When it strikes predominantly on the intuned aspect of the contemplative and emotional nature of humanity, it emerges in the limitations of the theologies, dogmas and ceremonials which reflect in religion the cosmic elements of form, appearance and rhythm.

Religion and art are essentially one, and their divorce leads to degradation in both. Religion that is not creative art can become a sour and cruel fanaticism. Art without religion becomes lifeless imitation. Echoes and reflections they are of a reality which



interpenetrates them and shows something of itself through them even when they are farthest away from it. The search for this reality is one of the supreme joys of cultured life, and one of the straightest paths to the highest spiritual realisation. Religion and art are, as Shelley indicates, God's revelation of Himself to Man, and of Man's reality to himself: they are also Man's revelation of himself to God, and of the God in Man to the God in whom Man is enfolded; a revelation "by him" (Man) "and us" (the celestials) "given and returned". This is the divine utility of art. Even if the expansion of consciousness which Shelley attributes of art meant nothing more than the expression of capacities beyond the present normal power of humanity, there is a deep value in the feeling that "we are greater than we know". Shelley, in fact, declares that the arts are but special anticipations of the general future attainment of humanity, the voices and shadows "of all that man becomes". It is therefore a matter of importance to ascertain the conditions of their beneficent development.

The passage which we are studying opens and closes with indications of the way of artistic progress. The apparitions of the arts

which appear before the prophetic eye of Prometheus are at first dim ; but they become radiant when the mind, vitally associated with beauty, focusses its attention on them, and gives to what is at first a vague emanation the ultimate status of reality, not by impartation from without but by evocation from within. This is Shelley's conception of art-criticism, based on reality, associated with beauty, consciously deliberate, aiding the advance of creative art by being itself creative.

But Shelley sees also a general normal advance in the arts, not only *pari passu* but identical with the evolution of humanity towards higher expressions of its inner nature. He has said that the arts are all that man becomes. In the last two lines of the passage he says that man is all that the arts become ; for the arts grow " more fair and soft " just to the extent that man, their channel of expression,

grows more fair and kind,  
And, veil by veil, evil and error fall.

In other words, (to restate the matter for the fuller realisation of Shelley's closely packed thought) as humanity grows in wisdom, and as the humanitarianism which was incipient

in his day in Europe develops into spontaneous and fully exercised compassion, not only will the evils that afflict humanity, and the errors that darken and misdirect its activities, gradually disappear, but the arts, which are man's most intimate revelation of his true nature, will naturally reflect the change in an increase of all that quality of consciousness that is concentrated in the word *fair*, and of all that faculty of feeling which is involved in the word *soft*.

We must not let the unworthy connotations that have come out of a century's vulgarisation of these words obscure their Shelleyan significance. To Shelley the word *fair* meant all that was admirable. "That fair being whom we spirits call man" was not a mere reflection of the Greek physical ideal, nor was it a drawing-room compliment to appearance and complexion. It was not even said of the "fair sex" alone. The *softness* of which Shelley speaks carried for him the meaning of an increased responsiveness to reality through the capacity for love, which is his panacea for universal ill and the central power in the performance of the Work Promethean. This does not make for flabby sentimentality or the sex-complex, but for compassionate power, for

the power of the liberated mind working in complete unity with the sensitiveness of the purified heart whose natural expression is "love and beauty and delight". And when Shelley thinks of Beauty, Power is looking over her shoulder, awaiting incarnation through the arts for the freeing of the world from its dark slavery.

Man were immortal and omnipotent  
Didst thou, unknown and awful as thou art,  
Keep with thy glorious train firm state within  
his heart,

he declares in the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty".

We may now put the Shelleyan æsthetic, as expressed and implied in the passage from "Prometheus Unbound" on which our study of the work Promethean in the arts has been based, into a paragraph.

From ultimate powers inherent in the nature of the universe come impulses which, through the mutual co-operation of the intellectual and æsthetical capacities of humanity, fulfil themselves in the forms of the arts. These art-forms, partaking at once of the nature of divinity which is their source, and of humanity which is their instrument, are the mediators between both. Their capacity to act as such



THE WORK PROMETHEAN  
IN THOUGHT



## CHAPTER V

### THE WORK PROMETHEAN IN THOUGHT

#### SHELLEY'S CONCEPTION OF THE WILL

THE poetical expression differs from the philosophical in that it is mainly creative; that is, it speaks less with regard to logical relationships and chronological sequences than to relatively self-complete emotional and mental experience and conviction. The philosophical mind works over the materials gathered by history, and rearranges them sometimes to a plan that produces what scholarship regards as a new system of thought, but what is in fact only a permutation of philosophical tradition given an individual extension or modification. The poetical imagination does not trouble itself with the responsibilities of history save to the extent that history may serve its creative purpose. From the necessity of its own radio-active nature it propels its conviction outwards and



upwards through the mental and emotional materials at its command; and it whirls these materials into a world of its own making which moves luminously between heaven and earth; its elevation and luminosity hanging on the quantity of stellar material which it absorbs; its continuity and longevity resting on the proportion of the true terrestrial substance which it carries with it.

With this difference between the poetical and philosophical methods of operation in mind, it may at first sight appear to be a rather unfruitful effort, to subject the works of one of the most poetical of poets to an examination for what they may yield to the questioning of the intellect, particularly as critics of eminence have been emphatic in their denial of intellectual capacity to Shelley. The latter superstition has probably already diminished in the minds of those who have attentively read the preceding chapters of this study, and will entirely disappear as we proceed. And with regard to the difference of method it need only be said that, in so far as philosophy and poetry are severally worthy of these great titles in their highest sense, they are both related to reality, the one rising from and through it into imaginative expression, the

other approaching it through intelligent understanding. Each is involved in the other as Shelley emphasises. The real extensions of philosophy have been made not by philosophisings but by creative thinking; and the philosophy of the future will eliminate all that overloads its living principle, while poetry will rid itself of the restrictions that have been put on its intelligence through over-emphasis on feeling, and will be valued by the literary criticism of "the new world of man" as much for what it says as for how it says it.

In both elements of a full expression (the mental and the emotional) the poetry of Shelley is specially rich, but our emphasis is here on the mental. Intellectually Shelley's poetry stands among the highest both in respect of the "fundamental brain-stuff" that spreads like invisible but sensible threads through the tegument of all great poetry, and in respect of the explicit exercise of the contemplative mind on the problems that challenge it both from without and within. There are passages of Shelley's poetry, as we have seen in the previous chapter, so full of that intelligent comprehension of reality which is called truth that they are capable of as elaborate commentary in exposition of their significances as

passages in any world scripture. But so distinctive at all times, so frequently brilliant is Shelley's poetical expression, that it has obscured the intelligible purport of his poetry to some of even the finest minds in literary criticism, who have declined to take seriously the recorded facts of Shelley's intellectual interests or the declarations of his wife as to the place that these occupied in his creative imagination.

In our study of Shelley's æsthetical ideas we exercised what we may call the centrifugal method of exposition on one such passage, expanding its significances fan-wise from the pivot of imaginative dogma. We shall now exercise the centripetal method of exposition by drawing from the whole volume of his work such passages as are expressive of his ideas in regard to a single matter, the matter of the human will, a matter of the deepest import to humanity on which Shelley frequently pondered.

In "Prometheus Unbound"<sup>1</sup> Asia (the inner aspect of Prometheus who is the ideal Humanity) questions Demogorgon (the oracle of Eternity) as to who made the living world and all that it contains. The answer is

<sup>1</sup> Act 2, Scene 4.

“God, almighty God”. The living world here referred to is not the general realm of nature, but the special realm of human nature, the psychological world in which the drama-poem moves. “All that it contains” is set out as “thought, passion, reason, will, imagination”. In “Hellas” Shelley makes Ahasuerus the Hebrew seer say :

Thought  
Alone, and its quick elements, Will, Passion,  
Reason, Imagination, cannot die.

But this catalogue of capacities does not complete the psychological endowment of humanity. All the capacities enumerated are of the positive order, and the proper companions of the positive Will. They are truly “powers” and are fittingly conferred on humanity by that aspect of the universal Being that Shelley calls “*almighty God*”. It would be surprising, however, if the extraordinarily balanced mind of Shelley left them with their purely masculine atmosphere. But he does not. Asia continues her questioning of Demogorgon :

Who made that sense which, when the winds  
of spring  
In rarest visitation, or the voice  
Of one belovéd heard in youth alone  
Fills the faint eyes with falling tears which  
dim

The radiant looks of unbewailing flowers,  
And leaves this peopled earth a solitude  
When it returns no more ?

Demogorgon replies : "*Merciful* God." Now the capacity here indicated by Asia is one of quite a different kind from those already enumerated ; a sensitive responsiveness of the feminine order to some inner relationship with that universal Being which equally animates nature and humanity in both its positive and receptive phases. This is Shelley's expression of the whole affective capacity of humanity ; the element in its psychological equipment which, in the special form of Love, and properly conferred on humanity by that aspect of the universal Being called "*Merciful* God," is not only a means to the fulfilment of the Will in action, but is, in the end, as Shelley teaches, its best inspirer and guide. It is not to be confused with Passion, which is Shelley's term for the enthusiasms of the psyche, nor with the merely erotic "passion" which an inadequate interpretation of Freudian psychology has elevated to a place of spurious authority in the exposition of the arts. Love, as Shelley indicates in the foregoing lines, belongs entirely to the psyche. Its tears may dim the radiant looks of flowers ; but the dimming is

purely subjective: the flowers themselves are "unbewailing". Its absence may make earth a solitude; but the people of earth have not vanished. The soul's environment is not altered by its emotional flux. Mother Nature "moves to her high destinies beyond the little Will that prays," as AE puts the same thought.

No serious student of Shelley's poetry is likely to raise the objection that these statements of a dramatic presentation cannot be attributed to the dramatist. (The whole intention of "Prometheus Unbound," as we have already seen,<sup>1</sup> is to embody Shelley's doctrine of the liberation of humanity through Love. Still, it will add assurance and clarity to our study of his conception of the Will in man if we quote from Shelley's prose his explicit statement, in an essay on Christianity, as to the source of the Will, and the interaction between the general and individual Will.

We live and move and think; but we are not creatures of our own origin and existence. We are not the arbiters of every motion of our own complicated nature; we are not the masters of our imaginations and moods of mental being. There is a Power by which we are surrounded,

<sup>1</sup> Chapter II.

like the atmosphere in which some motionless lyre is suspended, which visits with its breath our silent chords at will.

This Power is God ; and those who have seen God have, in the period of their purer and more perfect nature, been harmonised by their own will to so exquisite a consentaneity of power as to give forth divinest melody when the breath of universal being sweeps over their frame.

The essence of these two paragraphs (by an alleged atheist!) with their interpretative cross-reference to the "Hymn to Intellectual Beauty," is that humanity possesses by nature the apparatus of volition, but that this apparatus is set in motion by the active volition of the universal Being. When the human Will is thus aroused and set to the work of harmonising the individual life with the universal, the individual, in Shelley's conception, ultimately shares the creative power of the universal Being, and becomes an instrument of its pure expression.

To what has already been referred to as indicating the place that Shelley gives to the Will in his category of the faculties of the human psyche we shall add a passage from "Queen Mab" which sets out the characteristics of a "nobler glory" than a life of selfishness :

a life of resolute good  
 Unalterable *will*, quenchless desire  
 Of universal happiness, the heart  
 That beats with it in unison, the brain  
 Whose ever wakeful wisdom toils to change  
 Reason's rich stores for its eternal weal.

Here the Will is in the immediate front of Shelley's mind; the sense of resolute purpose and action given a special direction by desire for human good, and working 'through the feeling-mood of consciousness, and through the mental-mode in which Shelley (always alive to vital distinctions) makes the "ever wakeful wisdom" (the intuition that operates through the lower modes of consciousness) use the materials gathered by the higher mind ("reason") for the fulfilment of the Will-to-good.

Thus we gather that the Will, in Shelley's conception, may be set to work to harmonise the individual life with the universal, and also to widen this harmonising process by working intelligently for the establishment of the kingdom of happiness on earth. We note further Shelley's distinction between the *Will* as a power of humanity (neutral in itself but capable of being directed to ends to which humanity assigns a scale of social and emotional values ranging from good to evil) and *desire*



which remains ineffective unless the Will is roused to action. In "Julian and Maddalo" Shelley, as Julian, says:

It is our *will*  
Which thus enchains us to permitted-ill.  
We might be otherwise, we might be all  
We dream of, happy, high, majestic.  
Where is the love, beauty and truth we seek  
But in our minds? And if we were not *weak*,  
Should we be less in deed than in *desire*?

We have italicised certain words in this passage in order to bring out its appositeness to the point under consideration. "Weak" means weak-willed. In "Prometheus Unbound" Asia declares that man is "the wreck of his own will". And in the glorious passage at the end of the fourth scene of the third act Shelley visualises man as

free from guilt or pain,  
Which were, for his *will* made or suffered them.

That is to say, both the conventional and natural results of action were either brought into existence, or tolerated where they already existed, by the Will of man.

Reading these passages without reference to others in Shelley's poetry, it would be easy to fall into the error of taking them to indicate that Shelley was an out-and-out believer in

<sup>1</sup> Act 2, Scene 4.

"free-will" in the commonly accepted sense of that term, and regarded the Will as the supreme factor in human progress. It is true that, without the Will as an executive power, the deepest feeling and highest thinking would, as far as the earth-plane of existence is concerned, be ineffective. But it is equally true that the Will, supposing it to be self-operative, (which, according to Shelley, it is not) would be a blundering, undirected, futile and ultimately self-destructive force, in the sensual dissipation of its instruments, were it not given direction and character by thought and feeling.

In "Queen Mab" Shelley sings:

Spirit of Nature! all-sufficing power,  
Necessity! thou mother of the world!  
Unlike the God of human error, thou  
Requir'st no prayers or praises; the caprice  
Of man's weak *will* belongs no more to thee  
Than do the changeful passions of his breast  
To thine unvarying harmony . . .

. . . all that the world contains  
Are but thy passive instruments, and thou  
Regard'st them all with an impartial eye,  
Whose joy or pain thy nature cannot feel,  
Because thou hast not human sense,  
Because thou art not human mind.

This is one of the passages in Shelley's early writings that earned him the title of atheist and the rewards then attached to the title. Even today it is sometimes misread as the

expression of a pantheistic materialism that restricts the universal Being to the external aspects of its manifestation, and at the same time separates it from the human aspect. But we have seen that Shelley regards the Will as a power that is roused to action by the universal Being; and in the above passage he includes the Will as one of the "passive instruments" of the Power behind the phenomenal world. Its capriciousness cannot deflect the universal purpose any more than the changeable desires of humanity can disturb the universal harmony. They have their place in the universal economy; but nature is impartial to them, and cannot, in the strictly human sense, identify herself with the human reactions of joy and pain which are experienced through the special and limited faculties of human sensibility and intelligence.

At the same time we must keep a hold on the fact that while this distinction between the total consciousness of the universal Being and one of its self-limited phases (the human consciousness) is true, it is equally true that the nominally separated sense and mind of humanity are, with all the rest of the embodiments of the universal Life, offspring of the "Mother of the world" and share in her

character and experience. She is nature, in the Shelleyan conception, as observers of Shelley's "pantheism" have pointed out. But closer observation will show that to Shelley she is also the "spirit of nature," and therefore beyond and superior to it, as the spirit of man is superior to his lower vehicles. She is the world; but she is also its parent. And her nature is law, as is also the nature of all details of her being.

It is, as Shelley declares, the prerogative of humanity, when its volitional capacity has been aroused, to set it in line with the direction of the universal Will. "Our wills are ours to make them thine," said Tennyson. A universe of wills as separative as those we see in daily operation in human affairs would lead nowhere but to destruction. But the realisation of a

divinity that shapes our ends  
Rough hew them how we will,

though it may jar on unregenerate egotism, is the great hope and confidence of those who, like Shelley, grasp the truth of the unity of life in its origin, operation, and purpose, and seek to shape its institutions and actions accordingly. They see the individual Will not dwarfed or frustrated, but glorified, strengthened and fulfilled in allying itself with

the universal Will, wholly in intention, and as far as possible in understanding and action.

In his sonnet on "Political Greatness" Shelley says:

Man who man would be,  
Must rule the empire of himself; in it  
Must be supreme, establishing his throne  
On vanquished will, quelling the anarchy  
Of hopes and fears, being himself alone.

Here Shelley draws the whole nature of man up into its essential self, and in the spirit of the "Bhagavad-Gita" sets the self over its immediate instrument, the Will, and over the emotional reactions of its external experiences. But the self-centredness here declared to be the ultimate business of man, is not the solitariness of a unit but the solidarity of a unity. The imposition of any form of merely external authority on others is, in Shelley's conception, sedition against the Throne of God and of God in Man; and its emissaries deprive themselves of their own spiritual sovereignty by exercising a spurious power over others to cover or compensate their own material or spiritual weakness. On the other hand, to renounce external power and possessions is to enter into possession of the whole. Enforced renunciation chains and

degrades, but voluntary renunciation liberates and exalts.

That is why to Shelley there is no such thing as a pessimistic fatalism in the recognition of a supreme Will in the universe and the aligning of one's own share of it with the total. In "The Boat on the Serchio" he says, describing the awakening of nature at dawn :

All rose to do the tasks he set to each,  
Who shapes us to his ends and not our own.

In "Prometheus Unbound"<sup>1</sup> a Chorus of Spirits sings :

There those enchanted eddies play  
Of echoes, music-tongued, which draw,  
By Demogorgon's mighty law,  
With melting rapture or sweet awe,  
All spirits on that secret way . . .  
There streams a plume-uplifting wind  
Which drives them on their path, while they  
Believe their own swift wings and feet  
The sweet desires within obey.

This is not only a lyric of the imagination ; it is also Shelley's own declaration of what he regards as a law of nature.)

We have passed from a consideration of the origin and capacities of the human Will to some reference to its limitations as seen by Shelley. As an instrument of the universal Power, awakened into operation for the fulfilment of

<sup>1</sup> Act 2. Scene 2.

the universal Purpose, it is obviously beyond the range of the term free-will as it is generally used. Nevertheless, in the details of its operation there are sufficient varieties of material, gradations of energy, fluctuations of occasion, assignments of moral values, inducements of praise and deterrents of blame, to give the sense of self-volition and its attendant gratification to those to whom, at a particular stage of evolution, these are as necessary as any other ingredient of the universal flux. Shelley does not deal specifically with this aspect of the matter in any particular passage; but there is one in "Prometheus Unbound"<sup>1</sup> which bears on it. Picturing the state of things in the world after the release of Prometheus, Shelley says:

None frowned, none trembled, none with eager  
fear  
Gazed on another's eye of cold command.  
Until the subject of a tyrant's will  
Became, worse fate, the abject of his own,  
Which spurred him, like an outspent horse, to  
death.

This is Shelley's enunciation once more of the law that, while all must work out the universal Will, each individual, by virtue of a unique position in time and space, and

<sup>1</sup> Act 3. Scene 4.

consequently a unique participation in the qualities and activities of the universe, has a unique way of doing it, and this must not be interfered with by another. To do so is to reverse the psychological evolution of humanity; to turn those who should be masters of their volitional powers into being slaves of its uncontrolled operation. This is the ultimate principle of Shelley's condemnation of all external compulsions in the inter-relationships of humanity, such compulsions constituting a deprivation of the inducement and occasion for human beings to rise above their separative wills into some approximation towards affinity with the universal Will-to-unity. (Separation means hatred. Unity means Love; and it is Love that Shelley would enthrone as the controlling and directing power that will bring the Will of humanity into communion with the universal Will.) (The Earth herself, in the fourth act of "Prometheus Unbound" declares that when man is free,

His will (with all mean passions, bad delights.  
And selfish cares, its trembling satellites),  
A spirit ill to guide but mighty to obey,  
Is as a tempest-winged ship, whose helm  
Love rules, through waves which dare not  
overwhelm,  
Forcing life's wildest shores to own its  
sovereign sway.



Love allied with Will, volition used as the executive of compassion, leads to Power ; and through this Power lifts the whole being of humanity to such affinity with its divine source that the Will of Man becomes in effect the Will of God, and rearranges the externals of life accordingly. This is the essence of the passage in "Prometheus Unbound" beginning :

Man, one harmonious soul of many a soul,  
Whose nature is its own divine control,  
Where all things flow to all as rivers to the sea.<sup>1</sup>

That stage being attained in the embodied life of humanity, there is but one step more to get beyond the restrictions placed on the Will into the nearest approach to freedom of Will that Shelley gives expression to ; ) a state of such close affinity between the universal Being and the individual that they are separated only by the thin veil of

chance and death and mutability,  
The clogs of that which else might oversoar  
The loftiest star of unascended heaven  
Pinnacled dim in the intense inane.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Act 4.

<sup>2</sup> Act 3, Scene 4.

## **THE WORK PROMETHEAN IN LIFE**







## CHAPTER VI

### THE WORK PROMETHEAN IN LIFE

#### SHELLEY AS SOCIAL REFORMER

THE controlling influence in the mental life of Shelley was his intuition of "the One Spirit's plastic stress" and the operation of the life-principle of the universe through its details by means of the cohesive activity of Love. An influence so fundamental could not fail to disclose itself not only in the speculations of the mind and the affirmations of the imagination, but in applications in that localised aspect of the cosmic activity called human life.

The problem of life is the adjustment of expanding individuality to its surroundings, and the progressive adjustment of surroundings to expanding individuality; the finding of the point of balance between the inevitable growth of conscious capacity and the equally inevitable restraints which, seen from below, are infringements on personal freedom, and, seen

from above, are helps or provocations to individual growth and expression according to the reactive capacity and quality of the individual. The balance, however, must not make a dead centre: it must yield to expansion: restriction must help, not hinder, growth.

This is where the organisation of humanity has hitherto failed. It has put more stress on rigidity than on elasticity; and today is seeking to piece together the fragments of a shattered civilisation that has not yet succeeded in being civil because it has persistently depressed *civis*, the citizen, and has placed an uncivilisable abstraction called organisation in a position of opposition to life. Had the practical people gone to "mad Shelley" a century and more ago, Cobbett would not have found it necessary to describe the England of that day as populated with "the most miserable people that ever trod the earth"; and Europe would not have groped onwards to the military and economic catastrophe of 1914 and afterwards.

With profound wisdom Shelley claimed the poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of mankind"; but he did not thereby claim from them explicit legal enactments in prose, though he would have felt at home among the versified

laws and ordinances of Ireland before the Norman invasion of the twelfth century diverted the current of Irish culture on to a detour from which it is only now returning. Shelley himself wrote and spoke largely on various aspects of social reform, and had the courage of his convictions. His crusade to Dublin, "to help Catholic emancipation, further the ends of happiness and virtue in Ireland, and plant the flag of liberty on her shores" (as he himself defined his mission in one of his letters) is among the most gallant escapades in history, and would be enshrined in public memory alongside Byron's adventure towards the liberation of Greece, only that Shelley's missed melodramatic remembrance by his surviving ~~it~~, and by his antipathy to the civilised technique of destruction and death. Some day, however, the Fishamble Street Theatre in Dublin, in which Shelley spoke and Handel's "Messiah" had its first performance, will be rescued from its present humiliation as an ironmonger's store and be honoured as one of the world's places of pilgrimage.

In "The Philosophical Review of Reform" Shelley advised the reformers of his time to receive "the onset of the cavalry . . . with folded arms" should the authorities send it to



break up their meetings. He did so, "not because active resistance is not justifiable, but because temperance and courage would produce greater advantages than the most decisive victory".

Shelley's adventures in social reorganisation were not a success, that is, in immediate results. The cause of freedom in Ireland had suffered a temporary set-back through the corruptly engineered "Union" with Britain, which sought to substitute half measures, weighted with materialistic allurements, for the cultural liberation which, a century later, Ireland has all but achieved. Historical circumstances had made patriotism and the Catholic religion in Ireland mutual synonyms for suffering under foreign tyranny. These conditions shackled the work and ultimately dimmed the external enthusiasm of Shelley. "More hate me as a free-thinker than love me as a votary of freedom," he wrote, subtly throwing into an implied unnatural opposition intellectual freedom and political freedom. His farewell to Ireland, in which he withdrew his activity from the realm of deeds to that of the mind, might also be a post-script to his struggle to plant the flag of personal Liberty in England, and the retrospectively sad but

prophetically joyous epitaph of his whole life ; "I will look to events in which it will be impossible that I can share, and make myself the cause of an effect which will take place years after I have mouldered in the dust."

It is therefore not to his prose utterances or his experiments in revolt that Shelley would have us turn for social wisdom. Mr. Stopford Brooke 'warns us' against accepting Shelley's "high-pitched" poetical opinions on religion and other matters, and to take instead the "cool expression" of certain passages in his prose. But when Shelley said that the poets were the unacknowledged legislators of mankind he meant the poets *as poets*. He was a romantic not only by literary chronology but by nature, sharing to the full the romantic tendency to break established bounds and to escape from obsolete restrictions into larger enactments for the evolution of the inner powers of the human spirit. But he was much more than a romantic of the heart and nerves. He was a knight of the soul, and was only supremely happy when pursuing some spiritual quest along the sky-line. He could only satisfy the crusader in him by lifting the objects of his quest to the level of spiritual romance.

<sup>1</sup> "Naturalism in English Poetry."

He was cyclonic in nature, and drew everything up his whirling spiral to heights of conception which filled the lower atmosphere with lightning and thunder, wind and rain. Twice in "Queen Mab" he discloses the upward curve of his nature in the phrase "*aspiring change*". In "The Revolt of Islam" he condemns age because

it cannot dare  
To burst the chains which life forever flings  
On the entangled soul's *aspiring* wings.

But while his fundamental tendency is upwards towards his own archetypal world, at its height it is not aloof from or foreign to the general life of humanity. On the peaks of his poetry we find, if we have eyes for poetical geology, the naked rock that also runs under the soil of the plains; and we find also (which is the more important consideration from the point of view of the plains where the mass of humanity is content or compelled to dwell) that the rock beneath the surface of the plains is, in the Promethean vision of Shelley, the same rock as has been in times past and will again in times to come be elevated to the peaks. This is, indeed, the master-clue to the growing power of Shelley in modern democratic thought and achievement.

Any movement towards fulfilment in life of the vision of the fundamental unity, on which Shelley reared the sky-ascending edifice of his creative imagination, involves drastic readjustments in the relationships not only of human individuals and groups but of humanity and its environment. Hence Shelley made his personal peace with nature by reducing his demands on it to a minimum, and by renouncing the blood-sacrifice of animals for food whereby the mass of humanity in the Occident invokes the demons of cruelty, greed, sensuality, and mental, emotional and physical disease. His acute sensitiveness to any disruption of that unity made him soften the blow of the axe that felled the tree to make Ariel's guitar for Miranda,<sup>1</sup> by explaining that it died in the divine repose of its winter sleep on the Apennine Hills. The whole of social reconstruction is thrown into the lines :

Man, one immortal soul of many a soul,  
Whose nature is its own divine control,  
Where all things flow to all, as rivers to the  
sea,<sup>2</sup>

with the characteristically Shelleyan proviso that the true solution of humanity's economical and other problems will only be found when

<sup>1</sup> "To Jane—With a Guitar"

<sup>2</sup> "Prometheus Unbound, Act 4."

the services of life are not only free to all, but directed towards "divine" ends; not towards the disruptive gratifications of the flesh, but towards the unifying influences of the spirit.

But there is one special aspect of the Work Promethean in life in which Shelley's influence has been, as he desired, "the cause of an effect" of far-reaching importance in the evolution of humanity towards the Promethean ideal; that is, the emancipation of woman, whose world-revolutionising possibilities are more drastic than any enforced cancellation of war-debts and reparations, or any necessitated reduction of instruments of mutual murder between nations, because it is based, not on the expedients of distrust and fear and selfishness, but on the foundations of a more complete embodiment of human unity than any previous movement in history.

It has been said that a nation cannot rise above the level of its women. The statement receives assent by a moment's thought on the part played by womanhood in the creation, nutrition and direction of human life at its most plastic stages. The attitude to womanhood became the acid test of politics in England during the struggle a generation ago for the enfranchisement of women. In the realm of

literature it is the last but one of the questions that fix the place and endurance of poetry. Spiritual vision is the ultimate critical test, and by it Shelley graduates among the immortals. Just below it is the matter of the poet's attitude to womanhood; a matter as far above physical sex as the universal function of sustenance is above the mere processes of the ingestion and digestion of food. The poet's attitude to womanhood is the outer aspect of his realisation of the inter-relationships of the fundamental duality in cosmic activity. In the expression of this realisation the poet is compelled to use symbolically the language of human relationships; but to judge the poet's expression at the level of expression only is to judge Euripides by the masks worn by his actors.

It is easier to understand the woman-test of politics than it is to understand the woman-test of literature. They are rare birds who are unfamiliar with the mother-wing. They are equally rare who are familiar with the pleasures and significances of the highest expression of the human spirit in the form of great poetry. Yet between life in its everyday sense of domestic relationships, and life at the level of artistic creation, there is not merely an

In which the half of humankind were mewed,  
Victims of lust and hate, the slaves of slaves.

He returns to the same charge in passages of hot scorn that speak his burning protest against the mutual degradation of man and woman that arises out of the age-long restriction of womanhood to little more than a single function, and to the lowering of the male side of that function to the level of mere ungoverned sensual gratification.) His heroine, starting out on her mission of freedom and equality, says :

Yes, I will tread Pride's golden palaces,  
Through Penury's roofless huts and squalid  
cells  
Will I descend, where'er in abjectness  
Woman with some vile slave, her tyrant,  
dwells.

At first sight such phrases as the "slave of slaves" and "some vile slave, her tyrant," may sound like verbal conjuring. But for Shelley, to whom trifling with words was a sin against the holy spirit of poetry, they held the plain psychological truth that external action is but the expression of internal states, and that he who enslaves another is but placing on that other a chain that is already on his own soul. This is what is meant in the question and answer of stanza forty-three :







Can man be free if woman be a slave?  
Chain one that lives,—and breathes the  
boundless air  
To the corruption of a closed grave.

Man, neither as male individual nor as humanity in general, can be free while any man or any woman is bound.) (This is the full humanist and feminist gospel of Shelley.) (In the circumstances of his time he had to throw himself into criticism of the false standards of relationship that *men* had set up between man and woman.) The crusader of his imagination, Cythna,<sup>1</sup> sets her lance first against male tyranny, and when she triumphs over the fundamental inequality, she proceeds to social reconstruction on the only stable basis of equality and freedom.

Thus does she equal laws and justice teach  
To woman, outraged and polluted long;  
Gathering the sweetest fruits in human reach  
For those fair hands, now free, while armed  
wrong  
Trembles before her lash, though it be strong.

She finds home and comfort for the orphan and the oppressed. She influences political thought so effectively that even those who had been her foes, and who had fallen into cynical pessimism over the futility of politics, are

<sup>1</sup> "The Revolt of Islam."

thrilled by the new spirit of compassion which she carries with her,

And <sup>in</sup> cast the vote of love in hope's abandoned urn.

The century which has passed since Shelley's time has seen the translation of much of the dream of the poet into the achievement of the statesman. The "unacknowledged legislator" has come partially into his own. So much, indeed, of Shelley's vision has been fulfilled even within recent memory, not only with regard to the liberation of womanhood but of humanity in general, that, despite signs in the opposite direction to-day we may with confidence look forward to the realisation of still more of it as sung by him in the rapturous prophecy of a time when divine Equality shall have fulfilled itself in perfect wisdom and perfect love of which it alone can be the parent, and when Man shall have achieved the liberation of himself from himself, which is the Shelleyan condition for the true and unbreakable linking of souls and of nations.





